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THE WEEK

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Leashing Up the CIA

December 16, 1944, was one of the black days of US military history. When Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt struck with his 36 divisions, General Omar Bradley found the German buildup "astonishing . . . I had greatly underestimated the enemy's capabilities." For the next 11 days the Nazis held the initiative. Not until six weeks – and 6,700 American dead – later were the Allied forces to win the Battle of the Bulge. Why had Bradley underrated enemy strength? Post-mortems established that G-2 field men had predicted the attack several days in advance, but the warning was discounted at higher levels. And the explanation for this set forth by one wartime intelligence insider has an interesting relevance in the aftermath of our humiliation in Cuba.

The root of the failure, or so George S. Pettee persuades us in The Future of American Secret Intelligence, lay in a gross misreading of the relationship between regime and people in Nazi Germany. Viscount Montgomery's intelligence staff had studied the negligible effect of the 1940 bombings on British morale and judged "that the effect on Germans for the same scale of attack would be comparable, in spite of the differences in the stage of the war and the character of the regime. But among the American agencies, the notion was held that while the democratic British . . . knew their only alternative was a barbarous and intolerable slavery, the German alternative to punishment from the air was merely to change leaders." From this misreading of popular psychology the US had concluded that German war production had been going down – whereas in fact, as the Strategic Bombing Survey was later to establish, aircraft production had gone up sixfold between 1939 and 1944, and the output of tanks, explosives and propellants two to three times.

Now the intelligence service of every country to some extent views the world through national lenses; the Soviets, for example, appear to have considerable difficulty in perceiving the political vitality of democratic states. But the American inability to see other societies as they are seems to be unusually marked and to run in a more or less direct line from certain wartime intelligence failures through the postwar years right up to Cuba. Just as someone at "Army Group" Headquarters in the Ardennes imposed his own preconceptions about a totalitarian society on top of the evident facts, so there were those in the Central Intelligence Agency who seem to have assumed that Fidel Castro was not the generally popular, to many almost charismatic